

“I must lose my life!”

I. Jesus Defends His Mission

II. Jesus Defines Our Mission

*(Matthew 16:21-26) From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. {22} Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord!"he said. This shall never happen to you!"{23} Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."{24} Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. {25} For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. {26} What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Just for a minute, I want you to imagine that you're having a family reunion at your house. Grandpa and grandma are there, aunts and uncles, some cousins. Everyone is laughing and having a good time—everyone except grandpa, that is. On this day, Grandpa seems a little distracted, not quite himself—until someone finally says, “Hey, Grandpa, are you feeling okay?” To which Grandpa responds, “No, actually I'm not. In fact, last week I went to the doctor and he ran some tests on me. He told me that I have stage 4 cancer. The doctor says I have six weeks to live.”

Tell me, do you think that kind of announcement would have an impact on your little family gathering? Do you think that anyone would be a little upset, maybe a little distraught by the news that dear Grandpa will soon no longer be with you? Yeah, I think so.

Well, now you know how the disciples must have felt here in our text for the day. Only here it's not their grandpa dropping the bombshell. It's their savior. Jesus was the one who for the first time in his ministry speaks openly and plainly me about his “sooner-than-they-ever-expected” death. And, as you might expect, the disciples wanted to hear nothing about it. Which is why Jesus has to come right out and tells them and us, basically, “Friends,

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Here in our text, Jesus uses those words to do two things:

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The portion of God's Word that we turn to today follows right on the heels of the text that Pastor Shrinier preached on last week. Remember, Simon Peter made that beautiful confession about Jesus, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus commended Peter for that confession, said he was going to build his church on that confession, and then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. That's where our text for today picks up. We read, *From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*

Really, this verse marks a turning point in Matthew's gospel. Up until this point, Jesus had made only vague references to his death. For example, in John chapter 3 (v. 14), when talking to Nicodemus, Jesus made the comment, "*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up*" (kind of a veiled reference to his crucifixion). Later he talked to his disciples about how the bridegroom would be "taken away" (Matthew 9:15). But now Jesus is no longer dropping hints. As Mark's parallel account puts it, now Jesus "*spoke plainly about this*" (Mark 9:32). Jesus basically told his disciples, "Guys, I'm going to Jerusalem to die."

Well, this time the disciples don't miss the hint. They heard what Jesus was trying to tell them. It's just that they refused to believe it. They didn't want to accept it. It's Simon Peter who—as he often did—stands up and speaks for all the disciples. Matthew tells us, *Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*

First of all, can you imagine? A sinful Peter rebuking the sinless Son of God? What was Peter thinking? Well, apparently Peter was thinking that Jesus was the one who needed to have his thinking straightened out. Apparently Peter thought that Jesus had forgotten that he was (as Peter had just confessed) *the Christ, the son of the Living God*. To Peter's way of thinking, no Christ should ever have to suffer a humiliating death at the hands of his enemies.

But of course, in this case, the one who was not thinking straight was in fact, Peter. Peter was not thinking like God. Rather, he was thinking like men. In fact, Jesus tells him as much. How does our text put it? *Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*

The question is, what does Jesus mean that Peter "has in mind that things of men?" Is he talking about all the things that "men" like to think about? Football. Baseball. Hunting. Fishing? No, he's talking about all the things that humans like to think about. Things that humans like to chase after: Things like power and popularity and enjoying a comfortable life. When Jesus says he's going to die, Peter is afraid he's going to lose out on all the things that he has going for him like power and popularity and enjoying the good life. And chances are, Peter's not just thinking about those things for Jesus. He's things of those things for himself, too. That's why Peter so vehemently objects to Jesus talk about death. "Never, Lord," he says. Literally, he says, "God forbid that this ever happens to you."

My friends, do you realize what a powerful temptation those words of Peter would have presented to Jesus? I mean, here's Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, basically saying, "Jesus, you don't have to die. God wouldn't make you do that. If God really loved you, he wouldn't let that happen to you." You realize, that wasn't just Peter talking. That's Satan talking. Satan was the one tempting Jesus to take the easy way out. Satan was tempting Jesus to say, "Forget it. I'm not going to endure all that pain." Or to put it another way, Satan was the one, speaking through Peter, to try to get Jesus to abandon his mission in life.

Which is exactly why Jesus said what he did to his good friend, Peter. "*Out of my sight, Satan!*" *You are a stumbling block to me.*" Fortunately for you and me, Jesus didn't fall for Satan's trap. Jesus knew why he had come into this world. He knew that he had come to give his life on a cross. That was his mission. That's why he tells his disciples, "I must lose my life." With those words, Jesus is: I. Defending his Mission.

And yet, with those words, Jesus is also II. Defining Our Mission. What do I mean by that—that Jesus is defining our mission? Well, here in our text, after Jesus tells his disciples what's in store for him, he goes on to tell them what's in store for them. Jesus puts it this way:

*“If anyone would come after me (in other words, if you want to follow me, if you want to be one of my disciples)—if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.”*

Let’s take a closer look at those words. First, that phrase, “if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself.” What does that mean? Does that mean you need to say you don’t exist? You must deny yourself? No actually, a better translation might be, “if a man would come after me, he must deny his ‘self’.” You know what your “self” is, don’t you? It’s that voice inside of each one of us that says, “Me first! This is what I want to do. I don’t care what anyone else thinks. I don’t care what God says. I want things my way!” Jesus says that if you and I are going to be one of his followers, we need to say “no” to that sinful “self” in each one of us.

Now, is that easy? To deny your “self”? No! It’s hard. It’s really hard. In fact, that’s why Jesus calls it a “cross.” In Jesus’ day, crosses were not made out of finely sanded balsa wood. No, they’re made out of rough-hewn timbers. Crosses meant to be heavy. They are hard. They are full of splinters. But what does Jesus say? *“If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* That’s one of the crosses we face as Christians, namely, the unending task of saying “no” to our sinful self.

In fact, here in our text Jesus takes that idea of denying our “self” one step further when he says, *“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.* What does that mean? Sounds like a contradiction, doesn’t it? Whoever saves his life will lose it. Actually, what Jesus is doing is drawing a distinction between a life that is focused on the things of this world and a life which is focused on the things of God. Jesus is saying that if you and I are determined to hang on to all the carnal pleasures and material treasures of life in this world, then we will lose out on eternal life with God.

On the other hand, Jesus says, if someone loses his life for Jesus—whether in a literal sense, when someone is killed for being Christian, as is happening to many believers around the world, or whether this is to taken in a figurative sense—that is, losing your life for Jesus, as in, letting go of your life that caught up with the things of this world, the life that demands more and more and more, that life that is ultimately all about “self”—If you lose that life, in fact, if you put that life to death, if you crucify that Old Man, or as St. Paul puts it, if you *“put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Col. 3:5)*, if you drown the old Adam by daily sorrow and repentance, as Martin Luther puts it—then and only then, you will enjoy a life that is truly satisfying, a life that has real value, on both sides of the grave. In fact, here in our text, Jesus invites us to consider what we value the most when he says, *“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”*

My friends, the bottom line is this. The day is coming when our life here on this earth will come to an end. Maybe, like Jesus, or like grandpa at the family reunion, we’ll know when that day is getting close. Then again, maybe we won’t. The question is, until that day arrives, who or what will you be living for? The world offers you lots of options. And they all center, in one way or another, on your “self”.

God, on the other hand, offers you another option. In fact, it’s God’s only option. It’s Jesus. When you think about who you are going to be living for in your lifetime, think about who Jesus lived for. He lived for...you. Everything he did in his life—I mean, every single thing he did in his life—was for you. Every law that Jesus obeyed, he obeyed so that God could give you credit for what Jesus did. Jesus literally lived for you. That’s why God can now look at

you and see Jesus. He looks at you and sees Jesus's holiness. He sees you dressed in Jesus' righteousness. And really, that's what makes you different from the rest of the world. That's what allows you say, "I'm not here to live for me. I'm here to live for him who lived for me first, the one who died for me, the one who today gives me his body and blood as a remembrance of his death for me, as a transmission of his forgiveness to me, and to give me strength in my daily battle to put my Old Man to death, so that my New Man can live and rule my heart and my life, until that day, when God, by grace calls me home to himself in heaven, along every believer, alive in Christ. God keep us all to that glorious end. Amen.